

Meditations: October 4, Saint Francis of Assisi

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The topics are: poverty, the path to Jesus; the treasure of the poor in spirit; serving others.

- Poverty, the path to Jesus
- The treasure of the poor in spirit
- Serving others

ONE DAY, while St. Francis of Assisi was praying in the Church of San Damiano, he heard these words: "Go and rebuild my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin." He took this inspiration literally and devoted himself to the reconstruction of small chapels in ruins near Assisi. Later, he understood that with the word, "house," God was not only referring to material temples but to people, the Christians of his time, and the rebuilding would take place through detachment from material possessions. Another day, after hearing Jesus's command, *Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts* (Mt 10:9), he divested himself of all his possessions and began a life dedicated solely to the proclamation of the Gospel.^[1]

Francis of Assisi was a saint who, among other things, rediscovered the deep connection between poverty and the path that leads to God. We

are all called to walk that path, with the particularities of the vocation each of us has received. "Those who do not love and practise the virtue of poverty do not have Christ's spirit," St. Josemaria reminds us. "This holds true for everyone. For the hermit who retires to the desert; and for the ordinary Christian who lives among his fellow men, whether he enjoys the use of this world's resources or is short of many of them."^[2] Although the external situations of these individuals may be very different, all can live the virtue of poverty with an authentically Christian spirit.

St. Josemaría suggested some ways for Christians who live in the middle of the world to live poverty, including not creating unnecessary needs for ourselves, taking care of what we have, giving things up, offering the best to others, accepting inconveniences with joy, not complaining when we lack

something we think we need... At the same time, he pointed out that poverty is not so much about living according to a set of criteria as listening to "that interior voice which tells us we are being led by selfishness or undue love of comfort."^[3] Today, we can ask St. Francis of Assisi to help us see how we can walk the path of poverty that leads to happiness with Christ.

BLESSED ARE the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3) Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with these words. The Master offers happiness, both on earth and in heaven, to those who root their security and wealth in God. "It is wisdom and virtue not to set one's heart on the goods of this world for all things are transient, all things can suddenly end. For us Christians, the

real treasure that we must ceaselessly seek consists in the *things above... where Christ is seated at God's right hand* (cf. Col 3:1-3)."^[4]

The virtue of poverty leads us to infuse wisdom into our relationship with the goods that God has created. The poor in spirit enjoy things without being possessed by them; they can discern within themselves that tendency we have to construct our lives, sometimes unconsciously, on things, as if happiness depended on what we possessed. Poverty helps us realize how unreliable our material "security blankets" are, and how quickly moments of superficial consolation pass away, without touching the depths of our souls. Ultimately, poverty of spirit enables us to enjoy reality by connecting us with simplicity, with other people, and with God, regardless of our external circumstances.

St. Francis of Assisi called poverty the lady of his heart: "Even in this world," wrote the saint, "poverty enables the souls who are inflamed with love of her to fly up to heaven; she is the guardian of true friendship, charity, and humility."^[5] Indeed, although we are sometimes tempted to believe that prosperity and comfort are the keys to happiness, the human and Christian experience reveals something different: true joy is measured by the depth and authenticity of a person's relationships. That is the richness of the poor in spirit.

IN HIS letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes, *For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another* (Gal 5:13). Then he

reminds them of two Christian precepts: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Gal 5:14) and *bear one another's burdens* (Gal 6:2). The virtue of poverty also makes us feel responsible for serving others, especially the weak. "We cannot feel 'well' when any member of the human family is left behind and in the shadows. The silent cry of so many poor men, women and children should find the people of God at the forefront, always and everywhere, in efforts to give them a voice, to protect and support them."^[6]

Jesus invites his disciples to make friends with wealth (cf. Lk 16:9), but immediately after He urges them to transform material goods into relationships, to use the gifts received from God for the growth of others. "If we are able to transform wealth into tools of fraternity and solidarity, not only will God be there to welcome us into heaven, but also

those with whom we have shared, if we have properly administered what the Lord has placed in our hands."^[7]

St. Josemaria witnessed this virtue in many people. Specifically, he cited the example of an elderly woman who, though she had no shortage of economic resources, "spent next to nothing on herself. On the other hand she paid her servants very well and gave the rest of her money to the needy, while depriving herself of almost everything. This lady had many of the goods which so many people are anxious to obtain but she personally was poor, given to mortification and completely detached from everything."^[8] We can ask Mary to help us live with that poverty of spirit, knowing that it is a path that leads to God, and thus necessarily to our own and others' happiness.

^[1] Cf. *Testament of St. Francis*, 4.

^[2] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 110.

^[3] *Ibid*, no. 111.

^[4] Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus, 5-VIII-2007.

^[5] *Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, chapter 13.

^[6] Pope Francis, Message, 13-VI-2020.

^[7] Pope Francis, Angelus, 22-IX-2019.

^[8] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 123.